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ABSTRACT

As China continues to open to the outside world (economically, politically, and educationally), English language instruction and intercultural communication education in China has increased markedly to enhance international interaction with the United States and other countries. The Chinese approach differs from practices in the United States as intercultural communication education is promoted primarily through English teacher education programs. Students are taught not only the English language, they are taught about the cultures and ethnic groups who are native speakers of English. A written survey was administered to an English class consisting of 20 freshmen in the teacher education program at Northern Jiaotong University, Beijing. Results indicated that: (1) most students felt that their behavior will serve as an important role model for students; (2) less than half of the students selected teaching English as their first choice of occupations; and (3) 65% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they sometimes understand the words an English speaker is using, but do not understand the main ideas or message. A variety of techniques are incorporated in coursework to meet the intercultural communication objective. Practitioners offer three primary approaches for achieving intercultural communication education: the experiential, behavioral, and informational approaches. Attributional training should be emphasized within the informational method. In meeting the goal of training large numbers of teachers to teach English to Chinese students, China is emphasizing intercultural communication education within their English teacher preparation programs. (Twenty-seven footnotes are included.) (RS)

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION EDUCATION IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Abstract

As China continues to open to the outside world (economically, politically, and educationally), English language instruction and intercultural communication education in China has increased markedly to enhance international interaction with the U.S. and other countries. English language instruction is clearly recognized as a stepping stone to meaningful relations with western cultures. These relations have proven mutually beneficial to China and western powers. This paper will describe Chinese approaches to intercultural communication education. Students are taught not only the English language, they are taught about the cultures who are native speakers of English. Thus, the English language and English speaking cultures are simultaneously emphasized within English teacher training.

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The purpose of this paper is to describe how the Chinese educational system promotes intercultural communication education. The Chinese approach differs from approaches in the United States as intercultural communication education is promoted primarily through English teacher education programs. Since the opening of China, the teaching of English has been a priority in Chinese education. Students are taught not only the English language, they are taught about the cultures and ethnic groups who are native speakers of English. Thus, the English language and English speaking cultures are simultaneously emphasized in English teacher training. This approach provides intercultural understanding of both language and culture.

This paper is primarily based on intercultural communication education practices at Northern Jiaotong University in Beijing, The People's Republic of China. The author was a visiting professor of English and communication at the same university during the spring term (March-June) of 1987 and March, 1991. The author taught students who were being trained to be English teachers, observed the English teacher training process at various levels, and formally surveyed student perceptions of their English teacher training.

Teacher education in The People's Republic of China has parallels with teacher education in the United States but it also has marked differences. A primary difference deals with the greater emphasis the Chinese give to intercultural communication. The teacher education processes used are based on the unique development of their country.

In 1949, The People's Republic of China was established and for the next 30 years China was essentially a closed society to the outside world. There was limited interaction with other countries and, thus, little emphasis on the training of foreign language teachers. The only exception to this would be the teaching of Russian as China did maintain ties with the Soviet Union during this period.

Between 1966-1976, The People's Republic of China experienced a "cultural revolution". During this time education was criticized and changed drastically. Universities were shut down for the most part. Many administrators and intellectuals were taken from their positions and forced to work in the countryside in "re-education camps". All books were banned except for works by/about Chairman Mao (the Chinese leader at the time). Students were taught primarily about the basics of agriculture (i.e. planting and harvesting of crops). This period, which ended with the death of Chairman Mao, stunned the growth of education in China.

In 1979, an open door policy was implemented in an effort to help China compete with the outside world. Since that time, trade and joint business ventures with the west have been emphasized strongly, specifically with the United States. China is eager to open to the outside world, but only on its own terms. The following excerpt provides a description of these terms.

> Closing one's country to external contact
> results only in stagnation and backwardness.
> We resolutely reject the capitalist ideological

> and social systems that defend oppression and exploitation, and we reject all the ugly and decadent aspects of capitalism. Nevertheless, we should do our utmost to learn from all countries . . . . Otherwise, we shall remain ignorant and be unable to modernize our own country.[1]

As interaction with the United States increases so does the demand for English language training. "China still has a long way to go in making its population fully literate in Chinese, let alone in English. But in terms of both national goals and individual aspirations, English is near the top of the list."[2] English is now taught widely at all levels of education within China. By the time students of English reach the high school level they have normally had at least three years of English language training and, during the high school period, are expected to achieve a conversational ability with the English language. "In the universities, students practice English with a passion that comes from knowing where the future lies."[3]

To support the aforementioned objective students are trained to gain an understanding of English speaking cultures as they study the English language. They want students to not only learn the English language but to learn about the people who speak the English language. Thus, intercultural communication in China is promoted through emphasis on English teacher education programs.

This approach minimizes a problem that has existed in the teaching of English in China and other countries. A common

problem has been students can learn the English vocabulary but have difficulty in communicating and understanding conceptual meanings. "Lack of competent English teachers and underestimation of the lesson time that should be devoted to verbal comprehension and speaking in English were mainly responsible for students low performance in learning English".[4] "The poor English ability of middle school students is a potential obstacle to the country's opening to the outside world".[5] An official government objective, such as the opening of China, is taken very seriously by the Chinese people. Thus, answers to such problems are actively sought.

In teaching English as a second language, the emphasis on the communication process cannot be understated. Dorothy Bainton, chairperson of the pathology department at the University of California at San Francisco, conducts a two week workshop to prepare Chinese health care workers who will be studying in the U.S. Her program emphasizes "even though they may read English quite well, they may have difficulty understanding the spoken language and making themselves understood. And they face the broader problem of conflicting rules about communication and socialization".[6]

These barriers to effective interaction are grounded in intercultural communication differences. Intercultural communication "occurs when two or more individuals with different cultural backgrounds interact together . . . . In most situations intercultural interactants do not share the same language. But languages can be learned and larger communication problems occur

in the nonverbal realm".[7] "Since we are not usually aware of our own nonverbal behavior it becomes extremely difficult to identify and master the nonverbal behavior of another culture. At times we feel uncomfortable in other cultures because we intuitively know something isn't right".[8] "Because nonverbal behaviors are rarely conscious phenomena, it may be difficult for us to know exactly why we are feeling uncomfortable".[9] The intercultural obstacles to effective listening exist in a similar manner.

The effect of the cultural backgrounds of interactants on human interaction is a crucial consideration. "Culture is the enduring influence of the social environment on our behavior including our interpersonal communication behaviors".[10] The culture of an individual dictates interpersonal behavior through "control mechanisms--plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call 'programs')--for the governing of behavior".[11] Thus, the process for presentation of ideas (speaking) and the reception of ideas (listening) will understandably vary from culture to culture.

A written survey of seven questions was administered to an English class of twenty students. These students were freshmen in the teacher preparation program at Northern Jiaotong University. They were requested to respond to seven statements (SA - strongly agree, A - agree, N - neutral, D - disagree, or SD - strongly disagree). The purpose of the survey was to study their perceptions of the role of communication in the teaching process. Results of the survey are as follows.

1. I think I will be a good teacher of English.

SA	A	N	D	SD
85%	5%	10%		

2. I will most likely work as a teacher until I retire.

SA	A	N	D	SC
20%	25%	20%	35%	

3. Teaching English is more difficult than teaching other foreign languages.

SA	A	N	D	SD
5%	15%	30%	45%	5%

4. As an English teacher, my behavior will serve as an important role model for my students (regarding social responsibility).

SA	A	N	D	SD
35%	45%	15%	5%	

5. Intellectual development is more important than moral education and physical education.

SA	A	N	D	SD
10%	55%	25%	5%	5%

6. Teaching English was my first choice over other types of jobs.

SA	A	N	D	SD
20%	20%		35%	25%

7. Sometimes I understand the words an English speaker is using, but I don't understand his/her main idea or message.

SA	A	N	D	SD
15%	50%	10%	25%	

For the purpose of this report the author is most concerned with questions four, six, and seven.

Question four responses indicate most students feel their behavior will serve as an important role model for students (regarding social responsibility). Eighty percent agreed (or strongly agreed) with this statement compared to five percent who disagreed. This corresponds with a statement made by Li Peng, former Minister of the State Education Commission, regarding teachers serving as role models. "Schools in China should be most concerned with turning out youngsters with high ideals . . . and a devotion to socialism . . . . faculty members should

improve themselves by mastering Marxist theory, the Communist Party's principles and academic knowledge".[12] Li Peng is presently the Premier of China.

Question six responses show less than half of the students selected teaching English as their first choice of occupations. Sixty percent said teaching English was not their first choice while 40% said teaching English was their first choice. The author cannot speculate why there is such a high percentage of reluctant teachers but he feels it is worth noting.

Question seven responses indicate 65% of the students agree or strongly agree they sometimes understand the words an English speaker is using, but don't understand his/her main ideas or message. Twenty-five percent disagreed with this statement.

The aformentioned survey has shortcomings. Twenty students is a limited number to draw thorough conclusions from. The questions do not directly address intercultural communication. However, collection of accurate survey data in an oppressive society such as China is very difficult. This survey does provide a glimpse and context for the topic of this article.

A variety of techniques are incorporated in coursework to meet the intercultural communication education objective. The Chinese have used the "Follow Me" English language videotape instruction series to teach English language and British culture. The series includes over 48 one hour segments that instruct the student on English language comprehension and how the language fits within the context of British society. Many archetypal aspects of British culture are consistently emphasized throughout

the series. The author found when he taught English using the "Follow Me" series that Chinese students concurrently learned a great deal about British culture.

Similarly, the author was encouraged by senior Chinese colleagues to describe U.S. culture as context for English language usage. Chinese students are interested in learning about the U.S. so the instructor can productively intertwine English language instruction with American norms and folkways. For instance, to explain the continual evolution of the American English language the author correlated the constant change of the language with the constant change of the American culture. This led to many examples of American slang and description of how slang terms (i.e. rock & roll, Reaganomics, fuzz-buster, etc.) evolve. Students correctly learn to associate American culture with change.

This approach correlates bilingualism with biculturalism. In Communicating with China, interpreter Jan Carol Berris states "Biculturalism--sensitivity to cultural and social differences--is often as important as bilingualism".[13]

When an individual becomes bicultural he/she goes through an acculturation process as the new culture is learned. "Acculturation occurs through the identification and the internalization of the significant symbols of the host society".[14] Young Yun Kim, in "Communication and Acculturation," emphasizes personal and social communication within acculturation. "Personal (or intrapersonal) communication refers to the mental processes by which one organizes oneself in and

with one's sociocultural milieu, developing ways of seeing, hearing, understanding and responding to the environment".[15] "Through social communication, individuals regulate feelings, thoughts, and actions of one another".[16] Social communication is the interpersonal application of each persons personal communication basis of understanding.

Kim sees ethnicity and acculturation as being interrelated. "When the changes (to a new culture) are not complete, it is only natural that there remains a certain degree of ethnicity. Incomplete acculturation, depending on one's point of view, can be interpreted as evidence of (some) assimilation or (some) ethnicity."[17]

Ethnicity can be described through the definition of ethnic groups offered by Albert and Triandis. "To the extent that ethnic groups have characteristic ways of behaving, they exhibit somewhat different distributions of behavior configurations. . .. An ethnic group, then, may consist of individuals having characteristic behavior patterns and subjective cultures".[18]

The educational system in China seeks to promote intercultural communication education through emphasis on English teacher education. Practitioners offer three primary approaches for achieving this objective: the experiential, behavioral, and informational approaches.

The experiential method involves the learner actually experiencing the culture by living there for a period of time. Since this is not usually feasible, especially with Chinese

learners, there are other diluted approaches within the experiential method. This would include creating laboratory or "imitation" cultural settings or spending time visiting ethnic neighborhoods which practice perspectives of the studied culture.[19]

The behavioral method involves "reinforcing the individual for producing behavioral patterns which are commonly found in another culture".[20] The goal being to teach individuals about another culture rather than to change behavior. Similarly, Kim suggests acculturation can be effectively achieved "through communication training programs. Such training programs should facilitate the immigrants acquisition of the host communication competence".[21]

The third, and most common, approach is the informational method which focuses on readings about other peoples' customs or history.[22] This method seeks to provide a perspective or context within which the culture operates. Barna suggests studying the history, political structure, art, literature and language of the new culture.[23] This, again, encourages the learner to understand the framework of the culture rather than specific behaviors which are offensive or complimentary.

Similarly, Stewart warns against studying a list of "do's and don'ts" since behavior is ambiguous (depending on the situations and circumstances encountered). He stresses the learner consider his/her own behavior and how it is affected by his/her assumptions and values.[24] Assumptions and values vary from culture to culture, thus it is a stumbling block to "assume

similarity instead of difference" when interpreting situations in a new culture.[25]

Triandis suggests the use of attribution training within the informational method. This technique "aims to teach members of one culture to make attributions commonly made by members of another culture. Attributions are interpretations of behavior; that is, they are inferences about the causes of a given behavior".[26] This is helpful since attributions are based on norms, roles, affects, and consequences of actions which are operating in a particular situation.[27]

The author concurs with the position offered by Triandis that attribution training should be emphasized within the informational method. Since the 1989 pro-democracy movement in China, student interest in learning about democracy has increased considerably. Use of this motivation to learn about the U.S. (a democracy) provides a useful means for teaching English as it is couched in the norms, roles, affects and consequences of actions that operate in the U.S. Thus, the Chinese student effectively learns the language, how it is used, and with what effects. Ideally, the student can work towards speaking and thinking American English.

As The People's Republic of China opens to the outside world, the learning of English continues to be an important objective in their educational system. Their experience has shown that it is not enough to merely teach the English language, rather, it is also important to teach about the cultures within which the English language is spoken as this provides a context

for language usage. Teachers are being trained in large numbers to teach English to Chinese students. In meeting this goal China is emphasizing intercultural communication education within their English teacher preparation programs.

Notes

[1]Resolution of the Central Committee of the CPC on the Guiding Principles for Building a Socialist Society With an Advanced Culture and Ideology. Foreign Language Press: Beijing, The People's Republic of China (September, 1986), p. 6.

[2]Jacobsen, R.L. "Expectations Rise for Higher Education in China as Reform Temper Begins to Take Hold," Chronicle of Higher Education (October 28, 1987), p. 40.

[3]Jacobsen, p. 40.

[4]"Students Found Poor in English," China Daily (May 2, 1987), p. 3.

[5]"Students Found Poor in English," p. 3.

[6]Jacobsen, R.L. "Workshop Helps Chinese Prepare for U.S.," Chronicle of Higher Education (November 4, 1987), p. A49.

[7]Anderson, P.A. "Consciousness, Cognition, and Communication," Western Journal of Speech Communication, 50 (1986) p. 88.

[8]Anderson, P.A. "Explaining Intercultural Differences in Nonverbal Communication." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association (Boston, MA) November, 1987, pp. 2-3.

[9]Gudykunst, W.B. and Kim, Y.Y. Communicating with Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication. New York: Random House, 1984, p. 149.

[10]Anderson, 1987, p. 6.

[11]Geertz, C. The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 44.

[12]Xing, L. "Li Stresses Civic Role of Schools," China Daily (May 4, 1987), p. 1.

[13]Berris, J.C. "The Art of Interpreting." In Kapp, R.A. (ed.) Communicating with China. Chicago: Intercultural Press, 1983, p. 42.

[14]Kim, Y.Y. "Communication and Acculturation." In Samovar, L.A. and Porter, R.E. Intercultural Communication: A Reader. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1988, p. 345.

[15]Kim, p. 346.

[16]Kim, p. 347.

[17]Kim, p. 350.

[18]Albert, R.D. and Triandis, H.C. "Intercultural Education for Multicultural Societies: Critical Issues," International Journal of Intercultural Relations 9 (1985), p. 392.

[19]Albert and Triandis, p. 397.

[20]Albert and Triandis, p. 397.

[21]Kim, p. 350.

[22]Albert and Triandis, p. 397.

[23]Barna, L.M. "Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication." In Samovar and Porter, p. 325.

[24]Stewart, E.C. American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective. 906 N. Spring Ave., LaGrange Park, Illinois 60525: Intercultural Network, Inc., 1972, p. 20.

[25]Barna, p. 375.

[26]Triandis, H.C. "Training, Cognitive Complexity, and Interpersonal Attitudes." In Brislin, R.W., Bochner, S. and Lonner, W. (eds.) Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Learning. New York: Halsted/Wiley/Sage, 1975, pp. 39-77.

[27]Triandis, 1975, pp. 39-77.